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Diane Wald's *My Hat That Was Dreaming* and Kristy Nielsen's *Two Girls*

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Diane Wald. *My Hat That Was Dreaming*. White Fields Press, 1994. 22 pp.
Kristy Nielsen. *Two Girls*. Thorngate Road, 1997. 24 pp. \$6.00.

Is grey a color? In the fifteen poems that comprise *My Hat That Was Dreaming*, Diane Wald creates a world where colors are totemic in their power. A moon is so pink it gives headaches. A dog is so white it causes blindness. At first, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the magic Wald weaves into these short narratives. Like a child who makes “red” his favorite flavor, the poems here endow colors with properties beyond mere hue. Wald calmly presents a surreal universe, one containing a town that “sell[s] nothing but pantalones. . . . Miles and miles of pantalones. . . . Every possible variety . . . in every impossible color.” What’s even stranger, however, (and more revealing of Wald’s ambition) is the role that *grey* plays in such a razzle-dazzle environment. For Wald surprises us by making grey the star of her chromatic show. In poem after poem, it is grey that turns out to be the most beautiful and most meaningful color (or non-color) of all.

The volume’s very first poem, “Solo Tú,” illustrates grey’s power (while also introducing the important theme of uncovering):

[. . .] the scent that clings to a grey line of greens lets us know in
time to turn right, but turn slowly. We walk like leaves tonight.
Bits of conversation rattle, paint peels off the nearby barns, fear
rises [. . .]

The scent on the grey line is a signal to the poem’s narrator and her companion, telling them not only when to turn, but in which direction and at what speed. Throughout the book, Wald’s handling of grey is consistent. Grey’s appearance in a poem is always a significant event, noticed and remarked upon by the poems’ characters. Among the things grey symbolizes are the *grey areas* of life—for instance, those times when we are faced with difficult decisions for which no right answers exist. Such predicaments are uniquely human (a spider, after all, doesn’t agonize over how to build her web). Furthermore, they are particular to *mature* humans. Children, in terms of their moral development, see the world as simply black and white, evil and good. It is only in entering adulthood that shades of grey complicate our thinking. Black and white blur together; good may contain evil, a paradox that children can’t comprehend. Sometime in their past (during childhood, perhaps), the “Solo Tú” characters “believed in paint . . . believed the dearest things could be painted over.” But no longer. Paint peels, they have learned. Paint is only adornment; grey is the difficult, shifting reality beneath.

“Green,” the next poem, continues to explore the conflict between color and greyness. Here we meet a woman who “lives in a house of leaves.” Though initially the leaves are flawed—“some had bug holes, some leaf rot”—the woman cleverly tricks them into improving themselves. The degree to which she succeeds, however, is horrifying:

[The leaves] have tightened the walls of her house so no precious heat escapes, and no sunlight enters. They have insulated against all sound, against all touch, against all smoke of love [. . .]. She is leaf-proud now, overgrown, and in shadow.

The leaves, having become “perfectly green,” form an impenetrable barrier separating the woman from the grey smoke of love. The poem is a fantasy of absolute safety, of escape from the real world with its imperfections, its inevitable decay, even its love which, as smoke, is ethereal, unreliable. As desirable as this artificial world may first appear, the poem’s subtle though unmistakable message is that we must reject such fantasies. Though the woman attempts to make a go of it—she calls her leaves “honey” and is assured “they [will] never fall” (and thus never disappoint)—it’s the very perfection of her world, ironically, that guarantees the experiment’s failure. The leaves’ new supranatural verdancy makes it impossible for the woman to see how green they are. Significantly, the *excess* of color has left her in darkness, without love, holding the booby prize of pride.

Wald treats her characters respectfully and solicitously, regardless of what they do. While they may at times appear absurd, they are never ridiculous. In fact, the characters inhabiting Wald’s poems have good reason for wanting to escape normal life. A number of poems are fraught with disappointment, and fantasy seems an instinctive reaction. If a woman loves a man who “cannot say love” (as the narrator of “Girlish Eyes” does), it’s understandable that she might dream about someone who *can* show her love, even if that someone is not a person but a gentle llama. If a couple is childless and lonely (as in “Positive Negative”), it makes sense that they might seek comfort in imagining a full and happy life:

They could have a child [. . .]. coddle the child on top of the bed,
then put the child in the cradle and make love all afternoon [. . .].
No bed should have dust upon it. No afternoon should not be
made perfect with love [. . .]. they dream of a child, a bed, an
afternoon.

Again and again, we meet people, like this couple, who are focused on what could be, what should be. They are constantly distracted, even paralyzed, by dreams of an ideal world. Wald offers no easy answers for overcoming life’s hardships, but in the last few poems she provides some relief. “The Worst Is Over” is both the title and the hope, if not the promise, of the penultimate poem. Wald makes the theme of family most explicit here, giving us a narrator who stands in the forest with three doves, including a “father dove [who] is restless.” (It’s significant that the visual setting of this poem is completely grey: silvery grey birches, dove-grey birds.) And while the narrator acknowledges her sorrow—“my wing is heavy, my heart is sore”—she also knows that sorrow is not permanent. Unlike the narrator of the first poem who

“believed in paint,” this wiser narrator understands that peeling is inevitable and not necessarily bad: “Bark peels from the birches like pale wallpaper from walls, and there are love letters underneath, birth certificates, death notices.” To peel is to reveal life (and the deaths that are part of life); it is the opposite of painting, which only hides. The sun, which had been blocked out in “Green,” has become in this poem a “crystal moon, which heals our poor bodies, so secretly rotten.”

In the final poem, for which the book is named, we come to understand that loss will occur, but that it does not have to devastate us. The last narrator has in her possession a wonderful hat with a “pearl-grey band. . . a hat with a big heart, a hat that so loves to laugh.” But like the father dove of the previous poem, the hat is described as “restless.” And just when the narrator’s enjoyment of the hat reaches its peak, the hat disappears. Poof! Gone. The difference now is that the narrator has come to accept such losses as the price we pay for living in the world, and the poem ends matter-of-factly: “I put [my hat] on my head, and now it is not there.”

In describing the prose poem’s appeal, poet David Ignatow said, “I decided to . . . give emphasis to the imagination rather than to the line. By imagination I mean also the intelligence within the imagination. . . .” In this small volume, Diane Wald succeeds in balancing both imagination and intelligence; Ignatow would be pleased.

Two Girls, by Kristy Nielsen, shares some of the surreal qualities found in Wald’s work. Nielsen’s poems, however, are less magical than mythical. Each of the chapbook’s two sections features an earthy female as its heroine. Nielsen seems to have taken inspiration from goddess cultures—those communal, matrilineal, pre-Christian societies that thrived for millennia before being destroyed by the warring, hierarchical patriarchies that replaced them. Authors like Marija Gimbutas and Clarissa Pinkola Estés remind women that deeper, more vital sources of empowerment are available to us than what late-90’s culture would indicate. Sure, we’ve got all-day lipstick, Janet Reno, and the right (in some states) to breast-feed in public without being arrested, but such privileges pale in comparison to a legacy of female dominion. For Estés, the feminine is “the Life/Death/Life force, she is the incubator. She is intuition . . . fluent in the languages of dream, passion, and poetry. . . . She is the smell of good mud and the back leg of the fox. The birds which tell us secrets belong to her.” Estés’ words accurately describe the heroine of “A Girl Needs Something of Her Own,” the first and most overtly mythological section of Nielsen’s book.

The first thing we’re told about this heroine, called Full Grown, is that she “was born a baby just like the rest of us, but got her name because the corn around her reached maturity just the second she slid into the dirt.” Immediately and unmistakably, Nielsen lets us know that we have entered the realm of myth. A child born in a cornfield, who merely by touching the earth causes grains to ripen—such is the stuff of legends. And Full Grown lives up to her billing. In the six poems devoted to her, we are given ample evidence of her

powers: she makes “books float at eye-level for easy reading” and is able to “decipher any sound.” Though her name reflects the miracle associated with her birth, Full Grown is not satisfied to be labeled by others. So she changes her name to A Girl, in honor of the words her mother uttered moments after giving birth to her. In the same way, she refuses to accept the official (male) version of her mother’s post-parturition disappearance. She checks police records and courthouse papers, which claim that her mother abandoned her. But A Girl, distrustful of these government-sanctioned records, invents her own truth and proclaims her own version of history:

My mother grew smaller and smaller after giving birth. In the cell with barred windows, blood dried black on her legs [. . .]. Her hands curved into claws and her bird legs grew weak. After the change she floated up to the window, squeezed between bars, and flew away.

A Girl’s birth and subsequent development are witnessed by an unnamed narrator—identified merely as “the child no one noticed”—who provides a first-person account of A Girl’s activities. The narrator’s role in the poems is an important one, for she not only reports on A Girl’s life but is herself intimately involved in it, thus becoming part of the story she relates.

The narrator offers no insights into A Girl’s psyche, however. We are told nothing of her attitudes, her beliefs, her emotions. Instead, the narrator gives us purely physical clues, which we must decipher. We learn that A Girl surrounds and occupies herself with elements of the natural world, items that would be especially important to a bird: feathers, dried leaves, reeds. With such charms and the sheer force of her female powers, A Girl insinuates herself into the narrator’s life until the two seem to meld into a single being. For instance, A Girl has a “celery, dirt, and mold smell” that completely overwhelms the narrator, who explains: “She puts herself between me and everything else like a veil. I can’t touch anything without touching her first. . . . All my dreams involve her. Every walk I take is towards her. Even my tea is infused with her. I take it.”

Though *Two Girls* as a whole is admirable in its ambition, its attempt to capture the mystery of girlhood (and perhaps recapture the earth-goddess power inherent in the female sex), the portion devoted to A Girl is the book’s less successful half. The images, though frequently vivid, seem contrived—a case of style over substance. In “A Girl Uses Her Power,” the narrator speaks of “visions of birds the color of absolute night, birds with hands and feet.” While the description of the birds’ color is dramatic, the very next phrase effectively destroys the mood. All birds have feet, don’t they? There’s also the problem of simplistic sexual politics. Nielsen stacks the deck by making A Girl extravagantly multi-dimensional—she’s both pushy and fearful, pragmatic and psychic, an artist and a temptress. In contrast, the men in the poems are faceless, vaguely sinister, one-dimensional symbols of oppression. We know very

little about them, and what we are told remains at the level of caricature: their voices are “chalky”; like Nazis, they all wear boots; and for some reason they are obsessed with dragging away women who have just given birth (which is why A Girl has never seen her mother). Like gender, race also seems to have been used as a contrivance, though much less obviously. A Girl is described as a “dark” baby in the first poem, but nothing more is done with this fact. Loose ends like this lend an unfinished quality to “A Girl Needs Something of Her Own,” detracting from what could have been a satisfying exploration of femaleness in all its fecund, shamanistic glory.

More effective is part two of the volume. Titled “The Girl Calls Herself Gentle Names,” these poems tell the story of Sophia, a young girl who lives in a world less mythical and more recognizably our own. Some days, Sophia rides the bus to school and is teased by other children. Other days, she skips school to spend time outdoors. “Sophia’s Secret Life” describes her affinity with the natural world: “She names insects, the quality of the dusty air, her toes and fingers and scabs, the smell of the lavender dirt she finds in creases of her skin.”

Although she lacks A Girl’s godlike powers, Sophia’s life is far from mundane. In “A Girl Steps Into the Open,” Sophia is threatened by a group of boys who back her up against a playground fence. Ingeniously, she uses help from the natural world to defend herself:

Sophia blows a puff of breath into the space between her and the boys. Three bees hover there, bits of yellow fluff thrown into the air and suspended. Sophia holds her breath and sits perfectly still. One by one, the boys swing their fists at the bees and get stung, and the girl walks out into the open.

The unobtrusive, third person narration lets us focus on Sophia and the small miracles that she encounters in the course of a day. Seeing Sophia’s elemental connection with nature gives us a glimpse into the past, into the magic of our own forgotten childhoods—when, in the act of touching moss we *became* moss; or how, while tasting rain, we were tasted *by* the rain. The Sophia poems remind us of this oneness, this unity with other natural forms which, though an essential part of our childhood selves, is too often lost with the development of our analytical, compartmentalized adult minds.

One feature of goddess culture is its literal earthiness: woman is the ground beneath our feet, the black soil from which the green corn emerges. Male gods, in contrast, are sky gods, hidden in the heavens, far from human affairs. Nielsen clearly wants to bring us down to earth; and her Sophia poems, especially, attempt to pull us out of the clouds and back to holy ground. Such a philosophy is not exclusively feminine, of course. Wasn’t it a male poet who told us that “Earth’s the right place for love”?

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